



Yakov Reuveni remembers an easy and happy Iraqi childhood

Israelis from Iraq remember Babylon

By Lipika Pelham Jerusalem

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During the Shia festival of Muharram we would take part in the procession and along with our Arab friends, beat our chests to remember the epic battle of Karbala, said Yakov Reuveni, remembering his youth in 1940s Iraq.

Yakov Reuveni remembers an easy and happy Iraqi childhood "My best friend was the son of the mayor of Ammara. After school we would go out to the date palm grove with the freshly caught fish from the river Hidekel, which we would barbeque in the fields over an open fire."

The river Hidekel, Hebrew for the Tigris, runs through his home province, Ammara, 380km (236 miles) south-east of Baghdad.

Among his most cherished memories, says Yakov, is the after- school stroll along the riverbank with his Arab friend.

He grew up in a moderately well-to-do Jewish home with his parents, four siblings and grandparents. His father had a clothing store in the heart of Ammara's central market.

Nostalgia

It was an easy, happy life. Jews shared almost all aspects of life with their Arab neighbours, reminisces Yakov.

He was 17 years old in 1951, when his family emigrated to Jerusalem.

For the Jews of Middle Eastern origins, like their European co- religionists, coming to Israel was the culmination of a religious journey - it was the fulfilment of the centuries- old dream to live in the Promised Land.

I still think in Arabic, still I can't string together all my thoughts in Hebrew. You have to understand, my mother tongue is Arabic.

Yakov Reuveni But many who fled the Arab states and came to Israel as part of the mass migration that followed the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, look back with nostalgia and fondness for the life that they had left behind.

Israel has a vibrant Iraqi Jewish community who arrived throughout the 1950s. Many Iraqi Jews settled in the area known as Mahane Yehuda in the heart of west Jerusalem.

It is a famous market with alleyways lined with grocery shops: rows after rows of shops laden with colourful fruit and vegetables, fresh fish, dried fruit, sweets, different kinds of bread, cheese, traditional salted fish.

These stores are still mostly owned by the descendants of the Iraqi and Kurdish Jewish immigrants.

Fish feast

The most memorable taste was the fish called maskuf, from the river Hidekel, says Yakov.

After the Sabbath, we would wander off to the fields and have a feast with fish cooked on the spit, Iraqi pita and arak.

After maskuf and arak, a strong aniseed flavoured local alcoholic drink, the boys would go to Ammara's club to watch belly dancing.

Most of us still feel connected to the country where we or our ancestors came from. Our parents and our grandparents still remember many things from their Iraqi past and they bring them to us, with food, music, language Eli Mizrakhi Yakov recalls, with vivid, powerful details, the life that he had once led, a life that was changed overnight by the political realities of the time.

We used to eat with them, sleep with them, go to school with them, the Arabs and the Jews went to the same high school. We never thought of who was Jewish and who was Arab, until 1947. It all suddenly changed. The people that you knew as good people turned into bad people for you and you became bad for them. It was very sad.

But, while anti-Jewish sentiment flared up after the creation of Israel and the subsequent Arab-Israeli war in 1948-49, discrimination and attacks on Jews were part of life in Iraq.

In the most notorious incident, mobs rampaged through the Jewish district of Baghdad killing an estimated 170 Jews in 1941, in what became known as the Farhoud massacre.

By 1952, 120,000 Jews, about three quarters of the community, had fled Iraq for Israel.

Thinking in Arabic

In the heart of the Mahane Yehuda market is Cafe Mizrakhi, which specialises in certain traditional delicacies from Iraq. The word Mizrakhi means Oriental Jews.

Food stall at Mahane Yehuda market Food is central to lingering nostalgia among Jews originally from Iraq It is owned by Eli Mizrakhi, whose family came from northern Iraq, or what is now known as Iraqi Kurdistan.

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Both Eli and Yakov agree that despite having gone through the process of assimilation into Israel, they keep alive many aspects of their previous lives, in particular, Iraqi food and speaking Arabic.

We used to eat kubbeh and bamia, or okra. The kubbeh, made with minced lamb, was the national food for the Jews all over Iraq. Thursday was the day of khitchri - it's a dish cooked with rice and lentils.

I still think in Arabic, still I can't string together all my thoughts in Hebrew. You have to understand, my mother tongue is Arabic.

Now living in a small cottage with his wife in south Jerusalem, Yakov keeps himself busy recreating sweet pickled orange from his youth, while longing to someday return to Babylon.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6611667.stm